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Thomas Velasquez

1 In a 2017 interview for *The New Yorker*, Philip Roth insisted that Herman Melville’s *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857) was the right book to read today and that it was a “darkly pessimistic, daringly innovative novel.”[1] It is true that modern critics have welcomed the text’s originality and praised its flow of vivid descriptions and dialogues sketching the various characters, which differed considerably from the author’s earlier (adventure) novels such as *Typee* (1846), *Omoo (1847)* or *Moby-Dick* (1851*)*.

2 Published purposely on April Fools’ Day, the exact day the narrative starts,[2] by Dix, Edwards & Co., the novel did puzzle its contemporary reviewers who perceived it as a sort of practical joke and immediately pointed to its lack of unity[3] and deceiving promise that “something further may follow”(251),[4] making interpretation and progress through the plot all the more difficult for the reader.

3 Surely the abstract conversations of the disguised confidence-man with a varied crowd of steamboat passengers in a natural Mississippi landscape go beyond the mere test of confidence to exhort them to charity, and thus expose their gullibility and moral flaws. The colourful gallery of grotesque portraits – including characters as varied as a deaf mute, a deformed “negro,” an herb-doctor, the president and transfer-agent of a coal-mining company, a collector for an Indian charitable organization, or a Cosmopolitan philanthropist, to name but a few – as well as the incongruity of a large number of situations and dialogues undeniably contribute to portraying human existence as an absurd puppet-like show, devoid of clear meaning and coherence on the author’s part, and reduce the narrative to a “masquerade,” as the book’s subtitle itself clearly suggests. Such a limited perspective inevitably fails to provide the reader with explicit clues as to the novel’s interpretation and the intent of its creator.

4 However relevant these views on the book may prove, it is important to consider the significance of Herman Melville’s ninth and final novel[5] in light of his conception of

writing and in spite of the poor initial critical reception. Depicting an American society mostly driven by money, *The Confidence-Man* has baffled reviewers as well as readers because it constantly challenges conventions and established genres – refusing specific categories and definite closure – and manipulated truth through masks and disguise, digressions or irony, therefore compelling the public to engage actively in the very act of reading. In this way, the novel tends to considerably open space for interpretation and fully keeps its promise of “something further” for anyone committed to deciphering textual elements.

5 Twentieth-century critics have come to reconsider this aspect of the novelist’s writing as part of a post-modern writing technique and have reassessed the text accordingly, differentiating Melville from the reputation of simple adventure writer in the early days of his career as well as acknowledging him as one who explores and exploits the full potentiality of words in order to test his audience, just as the confidence-man does with his fellow passengers. Then, if “Time, [...] the solver of all riddles”[6] cannot help clarify meaning, an active reader will, which fully justifies A. Robert Lee’s reassessment of the book and assertion that *The Confidence-Man* “could with some justice claim to operate as the exemplary post-modern text.”[7]

6 This is precisely what the present study intends to determine: if the novel may at first sight be easily reduced to a mere satire of an individual capitalistic society paying little heed to its original residents (Native Americans), it nevertheless displays great complexity, by generating generic instability and borrowing theatrical codes, which tends to involve the reader in the (re)construction of an elusive meaning and make this particular novel a forerunner of the post-modernist narrative with its concern for indeterminate (final) meaning.

“Confidence is the indispensable basis of all sorts of business transactions” (133)

7 If Melville’s contemporary reviewers initially failed to see in the novel any coherent purpose, they still read it as a dark critique of American society. As such, the book tends to offer a rather bleak vision of the United States in the decade preceding the Civil War, and more particularly “the money-getting spirit”[8] that pervaded every class of men, whether directly encountered by the confidence-man on board the *Fidèle* or simply impersonated by him. It appears then that by being able to identify the satirical vein of a narrative fraught with deluded characters whose confidence is being tested to obtain money, readers may feel more confident too in their attempt to search for a meaningful and stable interpretation.

8 The steamboat sailing down the Mississippi becomes a convenient place for all sorts of conmen trying to sell stock in failing companies or miracle herbal medicine that can cure everything (from cancer to an ordinary cold), or raise money for so-called charities such as the Seminole Widows and Orphans Society, or even simply convince people to give money as a token of confidence in their fellow passenger. It is no surprise then if the terms “confidence” and “trust” repeatedly appear over the forty-five chapters of the narrative, like leitmotifs and constant reminders of one of the author’s major concerns: the exploitation of his contemporary America, when the power of capital was transforming the economic landscape and basic social

relationships by turning everything into a commodity.[9] This is why most exchanges in the novel are reduced to "transactions" or "operations" requiring mutual engagement in an attempt to do "business," perceived as the ultimate expression of confidence between the protagonists. In chapter nine, for example, "two businessmen transact a little business" and discuss shares in the Black Rapids Coal Company as well as the "downward tendency" of the market, concluding on the hypocrisy of the system with the denunciation of the stock-seller:

> Yes, there was a depression. But how came it? who devised it? The 'bears,' sir. [...] the most monstrous of all hypocrites are these bears: hypocrites by inversion; hypocrites in the simulation of things dark instead of bright; [...] professors of the wicked art of manufacturing depressions [...] gloomy philosophers of the stock market. (56)

9 Besides, not only does the term "trust" resurface throughout the text, but it also becomes highly conspicuous. Clearly written in capital letters on the sign of the barber shop in the first chapter, the expression "NO TRUST" conveys the unwillingness of the barber to provide a service for credit and conveniently refers to an absence of confidence, which is precisely what is being reassessed in the novel. The message obviously suggests that a business only operates on a cash-only basis and, by extension, so does the test on confidence. In the pages that follow, the country merchant bestows a half-dollar on Black Guinea, as "some proof of [his] trust" (25) and token of his confidence, implying then that accepting coins might be the only legitimate method of proving trust, therefore reducing the sole expression of confidence to monetary exchange for most protagonists. The term *trust* also acquires larger significance since its legal meaning[10] directly ties it to the profit-driven market that emerged in the 19th century.

10 It is a fact that during Herman Melville's lifetime, expansion and speculation were fuelled by the prospects of American businesses and railroad companies penetrating into the Western heartlands of Mississippi where indigenous people had been established for centuries. There then appeared an economic necessity to remove Native Americans, which is what the Founding Fathers of the United States, like Thomas Jefferson, had long ago willingly endorsed.[11] This explains why Melville's thoughts on the matter are transcribed and discussed at length in the novel – as the steamboat is sailing down the Mississippi – he who stood quite at odds by defending indigenous rights against the general feeling of hatred towards the Indians and Jefferson's conception of economic and territorial expansion. Hence, "the metaphysics of Indian-hating"[12] is developed in the course of a long discussion extending over four chapters (twenty-five to twenty-nine) between the Cosmopolitan and a passenger who happens to relate the case of Colonel John Moredock, an "Indian-hater of Illinois, [who] did hate Indians, to be sure!" (146). An extensive narrative ensues about the Colonel, the son of a woman killed by Indians belonging to "a band of twenty renegades from various tribes, outlaws even among Indians, and who had formed themselves into a marauding crew," (158) whom he eventually tracked down and killed, consumed by his hatred. Praised for his bravery and exterminationist skills, he joined the army and became a colonel but, paradoxically, his anti-Indian sentiment became more of an obstacle to his further governmental career promotion since other competences, like the ability to negotiate and discuss with the enemies first rather than directly confront them, were necessary:

> At one time the colonel was [...] pressed to become candidate for governor, but begged to be excused. And, [...] he declined to give his reasons for declining [...] In

> his official capacity he might be called upon to enter into friendly treaties with Indian tribes, a thing not to be thought of. [...] If the governorship offered large honors, from Moredock it demanded larger sacrifices. These were incompatible. In short, he was not unaware that to be a consistent Indian-hater involves the renunciation of ambition, with its objects – the pomps and glories of the world; and since religion, pronouncing such things vanities, accounts it merit to renounce them, therefore, so far as this goes, Indian-hating, whatever may be thought of it in other respects, may be regarded as not wholly without the efficacy of a devout sentiment. (161)

11 Such a perpetual debasing of Indians as well as the cruel treatment inflicted upon them – leading to their removal or extermination along the Mississippi – was quite characteristic of mid-nineteenth-century America. It was further accentuated by the violence of an expansionist and capitalist system which viewed Natives as obstacles to economic and territorial development. Then, by endeavouring to write "a fiction based on fact" (65) and by integrating those aspects into their own narratives, Melville's characters contribute to establishing a bleak vision of a society centered on a dominating part of the population, primarily driven by profit and the market forces, in which the American dream inevitably loses much of its original appeal: this is why critics such as R. W. B. Lewis have referred to *The Confidence-Man* in terms of "*antiface* of the American dream."[13]

12 At this point, if readers may have felt reassured by being able to identify the satirical mode the novel imposes with the denunciation of an American capitalistic society – more concerned with business than the fate of its original population – and of the way it excludes Native Americans, they, by contrast, might feel a lot less comfortable when it comes to assess the type of text one is dealing with, especially its close familiarity with the stage. This tends to considerably blur the overall meaning Herman Melville might want us to ascertain and require greater attention from the reader in search of a stable final interpretation.

"Life is a pic-nic en costume; one must take a part, assume a character, stand ready in a sensible way to play the fool" (139)

13 If Herman Melville has made it rather easy for his *confident* readers to realize how reduced human exchanges have become in a cruel "Wall street spirit"(49) – characteristic of the years that preceded the Civil War – they, on the other hand, may find it much harder to grasp the genre the novel is tied to despite the large degree of reassuring familiarity the satirical elements may have instilled in their reading. It is undeniable that the author constantly plays with conventions and borrows from different traditions which, according to R. W. B. Lewis, tend to "shake the foundations of the reader's confidence in his world view by depriving him of the safeguards provided by tradition and society."[14] Surely now the only certainty one can reach at the end of the novel is that "the book belong[s] to no particular class"[15] and that any attempt to categorise it is doomed to fail.

14 Consequently, the major challenge presented by *The Confidence-Man* is how to understand the structure of the narrative in the light of its generic instability and the mass of critical debate surrounding it, often more contradictory than complementary,

resulting in the absence of a definitive reading of the work.[16] One characteristic of the book seems then to reside in the multiple references to the stage adding to the confusion of genres the novels presents us with, as well as the endless shifting of identities and masks borrowed by the confidence-man on the steamboat which provides the perfect set for the different entries and exits of the protagonists. This constant role-playing under a multitude of guises partakes in the idea that (human) appearance can prove deceitful, which makes assessing individual character difficult and therefore places ambiguity at the heart of individual existence. This is notably conveyed by the wide range of physical transformations that occur throughout the different encounters on the *Fidèle*, as well as the Cosmopolitan's remark to Pitch asserting that "Life is a pic-nic *en costume*; one must take a part, assume a character, stand ready in a sensible way to play the fool." (139) From this perspective, the numerous and sometimes singular metamorphoses in the novel tend to question the stability of human nature and contribute to shaking even further the reader's fragile sense of reality – from Black Guinea who "seemed a dog, so [...] like a dog he began to be treated" (18), to the wooden-legged man with a laugh "more like a groan" (38), the miser whose "flesh seemed salted cod-fish" and whose nose looked like a "buzzard" (79), or the Soldier of Fortune's "unshaven face like an ogre" compared to a "hyaena," (100-101) most protagonists on board undergo a form of "metamorphosis more surprising than any in Ovid," to take up chapter thirty-one's title. Such depictions of the various characters also contribute to establishing a gallery of grotesque portraits – with the physical exaggeration of some of their traits – whose ludicrous aspect deprives them of any form of credibility: they become mere *marionettes* to be manipulated in a puppet-theatre,[17] either by the novelist who created them or by the confidence-man who impersonates them and pulls all the strings in his attempt to test people's trust. The public's confidence is therefore being clearly tested now in their reading of the text, which is made all the more open and complex since the narrative adopts the theatrical mode.

15 It seems fairly obvious then that Herman Melville largely exploits the possibilities that drama as a genre offers, not only conceiving his protagonists as puppets, but also as real actors who can multiply disguises and make the most of the stage as they perform in the varied environment the steamboat provides – the cabins, the "decks, [...] fine promenades, domed saloons, long galleries, sunny balconies, confidential passages, bridal chambers [...] and out-of-the-way retreats like secret drawers" (15). As a result, *The Confidence-Man* turns into a genuine play with the entrances and exits of the different characters/actors[18] and the confidence-man manipulating appearances and truth in the different stories. In this context, it is no surprise to find so many mentions of the stage and of Shakespeare's works in particular[19], the most important ones being those related to Puck or Lysander from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (20), Autolycus from *The Winter's Tale* (178) and *As You Like It* with direct quotes from the play clearly standing out from the core of the text:

> All the world's a stage,
> And all the men and women merely players,
> Who have their exits and their entrances,
> And one man in his time plays many parts.[20] (224)

16 Such references inevitably suggest that the novelist resorts to the same theatrical tricks for his narrative, implying thus that the confidence-man has likewise been playing many parts too. Stage props are consequently to be found everywhere on board

– ranging from ordinary objects such as a “business card,”(25) the steward’s “ringing [...] bell,” (26) the mute’s slate or the "NO TRUST" sign of the barber, to the more elaborate elements of disguise of the confidence-man – and typical (Shakespearean) drama techniques are used including mistaken identities, overhearing of conversations, impersonations of different accents, repetitions of words or situations and endless variations around the same notions (namely “trust” and “confidence”), etc. All those elements contribute to the idea that “all the world act[s]” (40) and that by questioning reality, the novel as a play has become a metaphor for the central notion, confidence, and a genuine test for the audience/reader expected to trust (or not) the text that takes shape on the stage.

17 However, if any attempt at tying the novel to a specific genre might generate meaning for those who read it, some critics on the other hand have regarded this as a destabilizing source of confusion, reinforced by the fact that no real closure is offered despite the promise of a potential sequel, “something further” (251), which is why initial reviewers originally considered the book as a “seemingly insoluble puzzle”[21] before the wide range of genres Herman Melville appears to be flirting with. The writer never actually seems to openly engage with one of them and yet he does not hesitate to exploit their codes. In this way, he persists in creating confusion all along, successfully combining theatrical aspects with grotesque elements, interspersed with lengthy metaphysical developments referring to ancient philosophers (Socrates, Aristotle, Plato or Epictetus, to name but a few) or more modern ones (Hume or Bacon), and integrating here and there some historical background context into the narrative (Tacitus’ view on Rome is subtly criticized when “the man with the weed” asked the collegian to drop his book in chapter five, for example, and Colonel Moredock’s story in chapter twenty-six evokes the dark fate of American Indians). In addition, by using different masks, the main protagonist becomes *Everyman* and the whole narrative turns into a form of allegory as most discussions and encounters can be read as parables (such as the story of the gentleman-madman, chapter thirty-four, or China Aster’s, chapter forty) fraught with biblical overtones and mentions of the Scriptures (including those the deaf mute writes on his slate in chapter one), tracing the progression from the ideal Christian conception of charity to a more selfish and individualistic one – “a charity business” (47) –, reminiscent of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s influential philosophical approach to the world in the mid-1850s. Being read as such, one cannot ignore the continuous metaphysical or philosophical vein that runs through the entire novel, constantly reassessing the concepts of confidence and trust in an unstable world where appearance shifts, most particularly in the course of the confidence-man’s discussions, sometimes in the guise of a “Philosophical Intelligence Office” agent (118) or when addressing Egbert in chapter thirty-seven, for example:

> you speak of a certain philosophy, and a more or less occult one it may be, and hint of its bearing upon practical life; pray, tell me, if the study of this philosophy tends to the same formation of character with the experiences of the world? (200)

18 Yet, since “we are being left in the dark” (251) at the end of the novel, and that “the reader is left with an uncomfortable sensation of dizziness,” to take up the words of the *Literary Gazette* in 1857, one is legitimately entitled to wonder if the generic instability created by the writer may not simply echo the uncertainty of human existence itself and the absurdity of a changing world. Such instability is likewise conveyed in the way words constantly alter meaning as they reappear throughout the text in various situations, such as “charity” or “trust”, two key notions introduced early in the novel,

endlessly reinterpreted in the different contexts and manipulated by the protagonists, therefore pointing to the impossibility to reach a stable meaning.

19 By playing with conventions and masks, Melville chose as a main protagonist a disguised impostor who deceives people by testing their confidence, and the novel may likewise read as a test for its public too. Then, the pervasive sense of absurdity in most situations, as well as the inconsistencies and grotesque aspects of the puppet-like protagonists, added to the lack of access to the characters' interiority, contribute to creating a universe devoid of credibility and meaning where certainties are difficult to establish. Like a "masquerade," the novel's "absurd line" (118) may simply be that the promise of "something further" may not exactly be what is expected from the type of books to which Melville had accustomed his audience. After all, if "the entire ship is a riddle," (124) and no genre can be ascertained for sure, then the novel might just qualify for the Theatre of the Absurd.[22]

"No great author has ever come up to the idea of his reader"[23]

20 If it seems that "the book ends where it begins"[24] with its inconclusive closing lines and deceptive promise that "something further may follow of this Masquerade," (251) there is however little chance that Herman Melville might have deliberately been bent upon obliterating his early successes with the form of his ninth novel. It is true that although he had drawn from his own experience as a sailor for the writing of his adventure novels *Typee* (1846) or *Omoo* (1847) – which gained immediate popularity and literary recognition –, he had already turned away from the rather simple and entertaining genre of travel narratives towards a more sophisticated metaphysical and symbolic one with *Mardi* (1849) and particularly with *Moby Dick* (1851), probably aimed at a more *active* type of audience who no longer read novels passively but were on the contrary expected to take part in the interpretation and decoding. The reader would then naturally be associated with the writer and with the narrator of the story if he/she wanted to read beyond words. In this perspective, it is important to note Herman Melville's own approach to fiction in his essay *Hawthorne and His Mosses* in which, once again, he refers to Shakespeare:

> Through the mouths of the dark characters ... he craftily says, or sometimes insinuates the things, which we feel to be so terrifically true, that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of them. Tormented into desperation, Lear the frantic King tears off the mask, and speaks the sane madness of vital truth... For in this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a sacred white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth, – even though it be covertly, and by snatches.[25]

21 It is clear then that an oblique way of exposing truth seemed central, even if it implied disclosing it through disguise and apparent nonsense (or madness) and in a fragmented way, for which the different seemingly abstract digressions and conversations of a disguised confidence-man should perfectly qualify. As such, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* naturally invites an active public to have confidence in their own reading in order to interpret textual clues and the different parts the protagonist plays, including those of the typical Shakespearean fools conveying truth under a semblance of nonsense. This might simply be the promise of "something further" made at the end of

the novel, which could be read as a form of meta-textual comment on the necessity to actively engage into the interpretative process. It also suggests that, in Melville’s conception of fiction, truth or meaning can indeed emerge while paradoxically being concealed by means of masks and words. As critic Edgar Dryden[26] suggested, sense happens to be *encased* in what seems to be nonsense and must be remediated by either the voice of the narrator or protagonist, or by the reader him/herself in order to emerge. Yet, relying on the narrator is compromised by the fact that he too speaks like the conmen he describes or tells some unconvincing tales in an attempt to manipulate readers through his interpretation. The public is consequently associated with the very act of interpretation and the whole creative process by adding their own extra layer of meaning to the narrative, which gives Melville’s statement a particular significance when he asserts that “no great author has ever come up to the idea of his reader,”[27] suggesting that, in the end, it is the reader who determines the ultimate sense and not just the writer.

22 Seen from this angle, the novel stands as a form of *dramatization* of the creative process itself, with its multiple references to Shakespeare and its various theatrical aspects, including author, narrator(s) and reader together within a broad interpretative network.[28] In chapter fourteen, for example, the narrator makes several meta-textual remarks concerning his own fictive public by questioning the merchant’s inconsistency:

> He may be thought inconsistent, [...] But for this, is the author to be blamed? True, it may be urged that there is nothing a writer of fiction should more carefully see to, as there is nothing a sensible reader will more carefully look for, than that, in the depiction of any character, its consistency should be preserved. (77)

23 Such comments on the nature of fiction inevitably add to the interpretative process by directly addressing and associating the reader with the elaboration of meaning and, in this case, with the way characters should be perceived – between “play of invention” and “fact” but “never [...] contradictory.” (77) Similarly, in chapter thirty-three, another major self-reflexive comment is made as the reader's voice is described:

> How unreal is all this! Who did ever dress or act like your cosmopolitan? [...] the people in a fiction, like the people in a play, must dress as nobody exactly dresses, talk as nobody exactly talks, act as nobody exactly acts. (186-187).

24 As a defensive stand, the narrator answers in this passage a potential critique on the book's seeming lack of verisimilitude, and appears to speak for the author too. Together they happen to share an understanding of the audience as being connected to their narrative(s) as the exclamation or rhetorical question clearly suggests. This is why critic H. Bruce Franklin fittingly refers to the confidence-man as “a character [who also] creates his author by creating other characters who speak words formed by both of them,”[29] pointing to the multiple voices echoed in the novel through a disguised confidence-man who interacts with the different passengers, or the narrator in charge of the story.

25 In this light, it is not surprising to find several versions of the same events being (re)told by different protagonists. In chapters eleven and thirteen, for example, the confidence-man tells the story of the transfer-man which he has already exposed under another mask. There, the third-person narrative entails a double level of reading, as confirmed by the strange preface to the tale: “as the good merchant could, perhaps, do better justice to the man of the story, we shall venture to tell it *in other words* than his, though not to any other effect.” (66) Similarly, in the following pages, chapter thirteen

opens with a warning not to judge the transfer-agent too easily, as he in turn warns the merchant that "one should not be hasty in judging the story of an unfortunate man." (71) The novel abounds with such examples of embedded narratives, the most intricate one being Colonel Moredock's, in chapter fourteen, based on the version given by a stranger according to the narrator himself reporting on Judge Hall, the original source of the anecdote. It seems inevitable then that "some parts don't hang together" (76) due to the different layers of texts and intermediaries. Consequently, the novel necessarily addresses a *good* reader, constantly on his guards lest he should be manipulated by the (act of) narration, and associates him/her with the making of meaning by weaving through the different (levels of) narratives. If the confidence-man may succeed in conning the passengers he meets with his tales, one is however certainly not entirely his dupe but rather, on the contrary, a witness to his masquerade, and therefore his indirect accomplice. From this perspective, the novel may qualify as the perfect model for an active and thorough readership.

26 Yet, if these elements have been praised for their modernity in regards to Melville's writing technique and have widely contributed to the novel's critical reassessment after the mid-twentieth century,[30] the novel's fairly recent rediscovery is mostly due to the reappraisal of the writer's techniques of representation – away from his previous novels and classical literary canons – and to its particular tendency toward metaphysical speculations on modern preoccupations such as nihilism, existentialism or absurdism which were already in filigree in some of his previous works, like *Moby Dick* (1851) or *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (1853).

27 *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* does indeed seem to be concerned with overarching metaphysical questions making its reading much more complex than what it seems. Through its elaborated long narrative(s) about random encounters and its seemingly grotesque and abstract dialogues between a conman and his puppet-like fellow-travellers, the reader as well as the various protagonists are constantly confronted with an uncertain world where meaning is elusive and appearances deceitful, as an echo of a capitalistic society whose frantic development is perceived with dread by the author and some of his contemporaries and in which the individual feels more and more disoriented while seeking to find his way. This might explain why the novel's end may appear so ambiguous, with the promise of "something further" and paradoxically the absence of any sequel, as the illustration of the void generated by the withdrawal of an author refusing to continue his novel; this is precisely what critics such as G. Van Cromphout have praised as "subversive of and at all times deconstructing [the novel's] own idiom and imagined world."[31]

28 By presenting multiple levels of reading and shifting realities through the disguised narrators who *dramatize* metaphysical questions, the novel has come to be reconsidered as "modern, [...] with [its] questions of epistemology"[32] and consequently resonates with today's critical approaches. With its constant questioning of reality and appearances – the Shakespearean play within the play – and its strong meta-textual dimension, added to the high level of dramatic irony with a reader aware of the confidence-man's conning and the absence of definite closure, Herman Melville's novel successfully provides its audience with a clear test of confidence. It seems then that the only way to pass it is to become active and *trust* one's reading by being confident as the one who bestows closure upon the text and establishes the final meaning – somehow deciding how to end the novel or at least what to make of it – with personal

interpretative choices. In the end, it is *the Confidence-Man* who naturally invites us to redefine our expectations of what the text should be, by confronting our certainties with a multiplicity of genres, deceitful appearances and (sub)narratives with dubious authority.

29 After all, the narrator's promise of "something further" may simply signify that while the writer's text is there clearly printed on the page, his narrative is largely left up to the confident reader.

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NOTES

1. *The New Yorker*, Philip Roth e-mails on Trump, January 30, 2017.
2. "At sunrise on a first of April, there appeared, suddenly as Manco Capac at the lake Titicaca, a man in cream-colors, at the waterside in the city of St. Louis", in Herman Melville, *The Confidence-*

Man: His Masquerade [1857]. Second edition, Hershel Parker and Mark Niemeyer, eds. New York, London: W. W. Norton Critical Editions, 2006. Chapter 1, 9.

3. *The New York Times* declared in April 1857 that “the volume ha[d] an end, but [...] no conclusion” and the *London Illustrated Times* that “the book [was] without form and void.”

4. All page references are from the 2006 Norton Edition of Herman Melville’s *The Confidence-Man* (Herman Melville. *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* [1857]. Second edition, Hershel Parker and Mark Niemeyer, eds. New York, London: W. W. Norton Critical Editions, 2006)

5. *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* is Melville’s final novel, published in 1857 during his lifetime, but *Billy Budd, Sailor* was published posthumously in 1924.

6. “*Time, which is the solver of all riddles, will solve Mardi,*” in Hershel Parker’s *Herman Melville: A Biography, 1819-1851* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996) vol. 1, 629.

7. A. Robert Lee, “Voices Off, On, and Without: Ventriloquy in *The Confidence Man*” in *Herman Melville: Reassessments.* Ed. A. Robert Lee (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1984) 157-175.

8. Quote from the *London Saturday Review*, May 1857.

9. Monetary transactions as prerequisite to trust and their correlation are discussed by Michel Imbert in “Cash, Cant and Confidence: Of Paper-Money and Scriptures in *The Confidence-Man*”, in Viola Sachs (ed), *L’Imaginaire-Melville: A French Point of View*, Saint-Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 1992, 77-93. Similarly, in From Gift to Commodity: Capitalism and Sacrifice in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2012, 144-170), Hildegard Hoeller explores how capitalism has contaminated American fiction.

10. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a *trust* is a legal arrangement whereby a person (trustee) or organization holds property or controls money for the good of one or more beneficiaries or may refer to a large company that attempts to gain monopolistic control of a market.

11. As David E. Stannard exposed in *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World* (Toronto: Oxford University Press Canada, 1992) 120, President Thomas Jefferson wanted to show the Indians no mercy: “in 1812, Jefferson again concluded that white Americans were ‘obliged’ to drive the ‘backward Indians’ with the beasts of the forests into the Stony Mountains; and one year later still, he added that the American government had no other choice before it than to ‘pursue [them] to extermination, or drive them to new seats beyond our reach.’ Jefferson's writings on Indians are filled with the straightforward assertion that the natives are to be given a simple choice — to be ‘extirpate[d] from the earth' or to remove themselves out of the Americans’ way.”

12. The pervading anti-Indian sentiment of the period reflected by Melville is recurrently noted by contemporary critics, such as Hershel Parker in “ The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating”, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 18: 2 (1963), 165-73 or Thomas Dumm in “The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating Revisited” in Frank, Jason (ed), *A Political Companion to Herman Melville*, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013, 310-332.

13. R. W. B. Lewis, *Trials of the Word* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1965); Paul Brodtkorb, Jr., *“The Confidence-Man:* The Con-Man as Hero,” *Studies in the Novel,* I (Winter 1969) 421-35.

14. *Ibid*, 65.

15. Quote from the *London Illustrated Times,* April 1857.

16. In “Herman Melville,” *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), Robert Milder wrote that "long mistaken for a flawed novel, the book [...] continues to resist interpretative consensus.” 440.

17. In *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), Wolfgang Kayser defines the motifs of the grotesque and mentions how 19th-century writers adapted “grotesque features” in their novels: “We find human bodies reduced to puppets, marionettes, and automata, and their faces frozen into masks or disguised.” 84-5.

18. In chapter 32, the cosmopolitan's companion admits having himself "once belonged to an amateur play company" (186), suggesting that he too has a knowledge of the actor's techniques and stage skills.

19. Ronan Ludot-Vlasak analysed the influence of Skakespeare on American novelists and how they extensively integrated some of the playwright's theatrical tricks as well as clearly referred to his works in "'Quite an original genius in his vocation' : Shakespeare, l'Amérique et la comédie des apparences", in *La Réinvention de Shakespeare sur la scène littéraire américaine (1798-1857)*, Lyon/ Grenoble, PUL / ELLUG, 2013, 319-34.

20. The quote is from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* 2. 7. 139-142.

21. William Van O'Connor, *The Grotesque: An American Genre and Other Essays*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962) 194.

22. The Theatre of the Absurd refers to particular plays of absurdist fiction written in the late 1950s which focused on the idea of existentialism and expressed what happens when human existence has no meaning and that all communication breaks down. This leads to illogical speech and nonsense, and often to its ultimate conclusion, silence. Some conversations in Melville's novel as well as some of his puppet-like characters appear to anticipate in some ways the Absurd by staging men's reactions to a senseless world, manipulated by outside forces, caught in grotesque situations or forced to do repetitive meaningless actions. This style of writing was later popularized by Samuel Beckett's play Waiting for Godot (1953).

23. The quote is from Herman Melville's essay, *Hawthorne and His Mosses*, which originally appeared, without his name on it, in two installments – 17 August and 24 August, 1850 – in the New York magazine *The Literary World*, edited and published by his friend Evert Duyckinck.

24. The quote is from Ann-Sophia Stephens (1810-1886), American novelist and magazine editor, in the *New York Mrs Stephens' Monthly Magazine* of June 1857.

25. See note 23.

26. As developped in Edgar Dryden's *Melville's Thematics of Form: The Great Art of Telling the Truth* (Criticism, Vol. 12, N°1) Winter 1970, 79-82.

27. See note 23.

28. Some of the problems raised by the difficulty to interpret and read the novel are discussed by John Bryant in "*The Confidence-Man*: Melville's Problem Novel", in John Bryant (ed), *A Companion to Melville Studies*, New York, Greenwood P, 1986, 315-350.

29. H. Bruce Franklin, Introduction, *The Confidence-Man* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967) xix.

30. In his critical essay *Herman Melville: A Critical Study* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949), Richard Chase referred to *The Confidence-Man* as Melville's "second best book" (125) after *Moby Dick*, and pointed to its seemingly deconstructive tendencies and interest in the con-man as a particular American trope as well as the potential meanings dramatized through the book's metafiction, uncertainty being echoed through the text in the voices of its interpreters.

31. Van Cromphout, Gustaaf. "The Confidence-Man: Melville and the Problem of Others." *Studies in American Fiction* 21 (Spring 1993) 37-50.

32. Richard Chase's essay on *The Confidence-Man* (*Herman Melville: A Critical Study*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949) provided an important turning-point for the literary critical treatment of the work. From this point, reviewers were more willing to take it seriously as an important and accomplished work, particularly after the 1980s when Melville criticism sought less-charted imaginative territory beyond the canonical *Moby Dick* and *Billy Budd*, and paid more attention to the exploration of modes of representation.

ABSTRACTS

Initially criticized for its generic confusion and singular narrative choices, Herman Melville’s *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857) was rehabilitated by twentieth-century critics who praised its modernity. By staging a trip on the Mississippi, the novelist introduces a disguised conman testing the passengers’ confidence in an absurd puppet-like show where appearances are deceitful and meaning is elusive. As an echo to the instability of human existence, the narrative’s ambiguous promise of “something further” is extremely difficult to interpret – all the more since conventions and established genres are constantly challenged by a writer who refuses to tie his work to a specific category and repeatedly manipulates truth through disguise, digressions or irony. By resorting to a large collection of characters in charge of elaborate narratives and seemingly abstract dialogues, the author succeeds in creating multiple narratives, somehow compelling his public to actively engage in the very act of reading if they want to read beyond words. The novel becomes a real test of confidence for anyone committed to deciphering textual clues and establishing the final meaning. In this context, the narrator’s final promise of “something further” may simply signify that while the writer’s text is there on the page, his narrative is largely left up to the confident reader.

Réhabilité au 20e siècle par la critique au regard de sa modernité, le roman d’Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade (1857),* fut accueilli avec bien des réserves à sa sortie en raison de sa grande instabilité générique et des choix narratifs singuliers de l’auteur. Imaginant une croisière sur le Mississippi comme prétexte au récit, le romancier mise sur un escroc déguisé pour personnage central, mettant à l’épreuve la confiance de passagers manipulés, tels des marionnettes, dans d’absurdes mises en scène. Ainsi, s’il se joue des apparences et du sens, c’est avant tout pour se faire l’écho de la fragilité de l’existence humaine dans une société en plein bouleversement. La promesse ambiguë faite alors par le narrateur au lecteur («something further») devient équivoque tant l’auteur défie les conventions, se refusant à enfermer son œuvre dans une quelconque catégorie préétablie et manipulant la réalité par le déguisement, la digression et l’ironie. À cette fin, une multitude de personnages variés s’engagent dans de longs discours parfois abstraits, créant différents niveaux de narration et contraignant ainsi le lecteur à s’impliquer activement dans le processus de lecture. Le roman devient une épreuve, un test de confiance, pour toute personne décidée à décrypter le texte et à établir une interprétation finale. C’est en ce sens que l’on peut comprendre la promesse finale («something further») : si les mots du romancier inscrits noir sur blanc sur la page lui appartiennent, son récit est quant à lui confié en grande partie aux soins d’un lecteur assuré.

INDEX

Keywords: confidence, genre, absurd, meaning, reader, post-modern, test, dramatize, grotesque, disguise, truth, digression, narrative, metaphysical, trust, transaction, appearance, manipulate
Mots-clés: confiance, genre, absurde, sens, lecteur, post-moderne, épreuve, scène, grotesque, déguisement, réalité, digressions, apparences, récit, métaphysique, transaction, manipulation

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